Quick Guide COMPUTERS, TABLET

Lightweight and highly portable, tablets are made to be carried wherever you go. Most have 7- to 10-inch screens.

What to look for

- A 10-inch screen for better Web surfing, video, and gaming; a 7-inch screen for better portability
- A display with a wide viewing angle
- An operating system that can be upgraded
- Ability to access a rich variety of apps authorized by the OS manufacturer

What to skip

- A 3G or 4G model, unless you need "everywhere access" and are willing to pay extra for it

What you'll pay

You'll spend about $400 for a good, 10-inch Android tablet with 16GB of memory that's Wi-Fi-only. An equivalent iPad costs $500. Smaller Android tablets that we recommend start as low as $200.

For more buying advice, go to *ConsumerReports.org/computers*

Shopping tip

Tablets can double as e-readers and movie viewers, and a wide variety of inexpensive apps is available.

Scan this or see how, page 11

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model.	Price	Overall score 0 100 P F G VG E	Test results Ease of use	Display	Touch response	Versatility	Portability	Features Battery life (hr.)	Weight (lb.)	Operating system
		A 7- TO 8-INCH SCREEN, 3G/4G+WI-FI										
☑	1	**Samsung** Galaxy Tab 7.7 (Wi-Fi, 4G, 16GB)	$700	80	◓	◓	◓	◓	◓	8.3	0.8	And. 3.2
☑	2	**Pantech** Element (Wi-Fi, 4G, 16GB)	450	76	◓	◓	◓	◓	◓	10.2	1	And. 3.2
☑	3	**Samsung** Galaxy Tab 7.0 Plus (Wi-Fi, 4G, 16GB)	500	75	◓	◓	◓	◓	◓	6.2	0.8	And. 3.2
☑	4	**T-Mobile** SpringBoard (Wi-Fi, 4G, 16GB)	430	73	◓	◓	◓	◓	◓	6.1	0.9	And. 3.2
☑	5	**Motorola** Droid Xyboard 8.2 (Wi-Fi, 4G, 32GB) Droid Xyboard 8.2 (Wi-Fi, 4G, 16GB)	700	73	◓	◓	◓	◓	◓	5.2	0.9	And. 3.2
☑	6	**ZTE** Optik (Wi-Fi, 3G, 16GB)	350	72	◓	◓	◓	◓	◓	6.6	0.9	And. 3.2
☑	7	**Sony** Tablet P (Wi-Fi, 4G, 4GB)	550	68	◓	◓	◓	○	○	6.3	0.8	And. 3.2
	8	**ViewSonic** ViewPad 7 (Wi-Fi, 3G, 1GB)	300	60	◓	◒	◓	○	◓	7	0.8	And. 2.2

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results: Ease of use	Display	Touch response	Versatility	Portability	Features: Battery life (hr.)	Weight (lb.)	Operating system
		Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model.		0 100 P | F | G | VG | E								
	B	**7- TO 8-INCH SCREEN, WI-FI-ONLY**										
☑	1	**Toshiba** Excite 7.7 (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	$500	79	◓	◓	◓	◓	◓	9.3	0.7	And. 4
✔	2	**Google** Nexus 7 (Wi-Fi, 16GB) Nexus 7 (Wi-Fi, 8GB)	250	79	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	9.5	0.7	And. 4.1
✔	3	**Samsung** Galaxy Tab 2 (7.0) (Wi-Fi, 8GB)	250	76	◓	◓	◓	◓	◓	8.3	0.8	And. 4
☑	4	**Samsung** Galaxy Tab 7.0 Plus (Wi-Fi, 16GB) Galaxy Tab 7.0 Plus (Wi-Fi, 32GB)	350	74	◓	◓	◓	◓	◓	6.5	0.8	And. 3.2
✔	5	**BlackBerry** PlayBook (Wi-Fi, 16GB) PlayBook (Wi-Fi, 32GB), PlayBook (Wi-Fi, 64GB)	200	70	◓	◓	◓	◓	◓	7.6	1	RIM QNX 2
☑	6	**Toshiba** Thrive 7" (Wi-Fi, 16GB) Thrive 7" (Wi-Fi, 32GB)	380	70	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	5	0.8	And. 3.2
✔	7	**Amazon** Kindle Fire (Wi-Fi, 8GB)	200	66	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	6.3	0.9	And. 2.3
☑	8	**Barnes** & Noble Nook Tablet (Wi-Fi, 16GB) Nook Tablet (Wi-Fi, 8GB)	250	65	◓	◓	◓	◒	◓	6.2	0.9	And. 2.3
	9	**Acer** Iconia Tab A100 (Wi-Fi, 8GB)	250	60	◓	○	◓	◓	○	4.7	0.9	And. 4
	10	**Lenovo** IdeaPad Tablet A1 (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	200	60	◓	◒	◓	○	◓	6.5	0.9	And. 2.3
	11	**Archos** 70b Internet Tablet (Wi-Fi, 8GB)	200	57	◓	◒	◓	○	◓	5.4	0.7	And. 3.2
	12	**Archos** 80 G9 (Wi-Fi, 16GB) 80 G9 (Wi-Fi, 8GB)	300	56	◓	◒	◓	○	○	5.7	1.1	And. 4
	13	**Pandigital** SuperNova (Wi-Fi, 4GB)	200	50	○	◒	◓	○	○	6.1	1.1	And. 2.3
	14	**ViewSonic** ViewPad 7e (Wi-Fi, 4GB)	170	45	○	◒	◓	◒	○	5.2	1	And. 2.3
	15	**Coby** Kyros MID7035 (Wi-Fi, 4GB)	110	44	○	◒	◓	◒	○	4.3	0.7	And. 4
	16	**ViewSonic** ViewBook VB730 (Wi-Fi, 8GB)	210	43	○	◒	○	◒	○	6.6	1	And. 2.2

Ratings Key ◓ Excellent ◓ Very good ○ Good ◒ Fair ● Poor

✔ **CR Best Buy** These models offer the best combination of performance and price. All are recommended.

☑ **Recommended** These are high-performing models that stand out.

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model **Similar models,** in small type, are comparable to tested model.	Price	Overall score 0 100 P | F | G | VG | E	Test results Ease of use	Display	Touch response	Versatility	Portability	Features Battery life (hr.)	Weight (lb.)	Operating system
		C 9- TO 12-INCH SCREEN, 3G/4G+WI-FI										
☑	1	**Apple** iPad (Wi-Fi, 4G, 16GB) (3rd gen) iPad (Wi-Fi, 4G, 64GB) (3rd gen), iPad (Wi-Fi, 4G, 32GB) (3rd gen)	$630	85	⊖	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	11.6	1.5	iOS 5
☑	2	**Samsung** Galaxy Tab 8.9 (Wi-Fi, 4G, 16GB)	630	82	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊜	8.9	1	And. 3.2
☑	3	**Apple** iPad 2 (Wi-Fi, 3G, 16GB) iPad 2 (Wi-Fi, 3G, 32GB), iPad 2 (Wi-Fi, 3G, 64GB)	530	82	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊜	11.6	1.3	iOS 5
☑	4	**Samsung** Galaxy Tab 10.1 (Wi-Fi, 4G, 16GB)	700	80	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊜	8.9	1.3	And. 3.1
☑	5	**Motorola** Droid Xyboard 10.1 (Wi-Fi, 4G, 16GB)	700	79	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊜	8.9	1.3	And. 3.2
	6	**Acer** Iconia Tab A501 (Wi-Fi, 4G, 16GB)	400	71	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊖	8.1	1.7	And. 3.2
		D 9- TO 12-INCH SCREEN, WI-FI-ONLY										
☑	1	**Apple** iPad (Wi-Fi, 16GB) (3rd gen)	500	83	⊖	⊜	⊜	⊖	⊜	11.5	1.5	iOS 5
☑	2	**Asus** Eee Pad Transformer Prime TF201 (Wi-Fi, 32GB)	500	82	⊖	⊜	⊜	⊖	⊜	8.5	1.3	And. 4
☑	3	**Samsung** Galaxy Tab 2 (10.1) (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	400	82	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊜	12.4	1.3	And. 4
☑	4	**Samsung** Galaxy Tab 8.9 (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	400	80	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊜	8.4	1	And. 3.1
☑	5	**Acer** Iconia Tab A700 (Wi-Fi, 32GB)	450	80	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊜	9.5	1.5	And. 4
☑	6	**Samsung** Galaxy Tab 10.1 (Wi-Fi, 32GB)	550	80	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊜	9.3	1.2	And. 3.1
☑	7	**Asus** Transformer Pad TF300T (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	380	80	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊜	8.9	1.4	And. 4
☑	8	**Lenovo** IdeaTab S2109 (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	450	80	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊜	10	1.3	And. 4
☑	9	**Apple** iPad 2 (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	400	80	⊖	⊖	⊜	○	⊜	11.6	1.3	iOS 5
☑	10	**Toshiba** Excite 10 (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	450	79	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊜	8.8	1.3	And. 4
☑	11	**Toshiba** Excite 10LE (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	530	79	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊜	8.1	1.1	And. 4
☑	12	**Acer** Iconia Tab A510 (Wi-Fi, 32GB)	450	78	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊜	10	1.5	And. 4
☑	13	**Sony** Tablet S (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	350	77	⊖	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊖	9.1	1.3	And. 4

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	D	**9- TO 12-INCH SCREEN, WI-FI-ONLY** continued										
☑	14	**Asus** Eee Pad Transformer (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	$400	75	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	9	1.5	And. 4
☑	15	**Motorola** Xoom (Wi-Fi, 32GB)	500	75	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	11	1.6	And. 3.1
☑	16	**Acer** Iconia Tab A200 (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	350	74	⊜	○	⊜	⊜	⊜	9.6	1.6	And. 4
	17	**Acer** Iconia Tab A500 (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	350	72	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	8.6	1.7	And. 4
	18	**Asus** Eee Pad Slider SL101 (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	480	72	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	○	9.5	2.1	And. 3.2
	19	**Lenovo** ThinkPad Tablet 1838 (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	500	71	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	7.7	1.7	And. 3.1
	20	**Toshiba** Thrive (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	400	70	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	○	9.5	2.1	And. 3.1
	21	**Velocity** Micro Cruz Tablet T510 (Wi-Fi, 8GB)	250	67	○	⊜	⊜	◒	⊜	9.7	1.4	And. 4
	22	**Archos** 101 G9 (Wi-Fi, 16GB)	380	67	⊜	○	⊜	○	⊜	7	1.4	And. 4
	23	**ViewSonic** ViewPad 10e (Wi-Fi, 4GB)	850	63	○	⊜	⊜	◒	⊜	6	1.3	And. 2.3
	24	**Archos** 101 G9 (Wi-Fi, 250GB)	390	60	⊜	○	⊜	○	○	5	1.8	And. 4
	25	**ViewSonic** ViewPad 10pi (Wi-Fi, 64GB)	250	56	○	○	⊜	⊜	○	4.8	1.7	And. 2.3

Ratings Key ⊜ Excellent ⊜ Very good ○ Good ◒ Fair ● Poor

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Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is based on ease of use, display, touch response, versatility, battery life, and weight. We judge **ease of use** reading books, playing media, and using e-mail and the Web. **Display** score reflects color, viewing angle, brightness, and amount of glare. **Touch response** indicates responsiveness of the touch screen when selecting and moving objects or typing. **Versatility** reflects the presence of useful features. **Portability** score is based on size, weight, and battery life. **Battery life (hr.)** indicates the time it takes to deplete a fully charged battery while the tablet loads a sequence of Web pages over Wi-Fi. **Weight (lb.)** is without a case or cover. The **operating system** is the program that runs the user interface and apps. **Price** is approximate retail.

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Quick Guide SMART PHONES

Smart phones are getting smarter every day. They're not only great for texting, e-mail, and social networking, but they can also play music, shoot photos and video, and direct you via GPS navigation.

Shopping tip

Make sure you can read the phone's display in bright sunlight, especially for texting and Web surfing.

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What to look for

- The phone's operating system, which dictates its features and capabilities
- How many apps are available and what they cost
- The keyboard—phones with virtual keyboards tend to be less bulky than models with physical keyboards, but it's easier to type on a physical keyboard without looking

What to skip

- Phone insurance and extended warranties, which are not worth it when you factor in the extra expense, high deductibles, and low chance of using them

What you'll pay

Phone prices with a two-year contract, including rebates, range from about $50 to $300. Smart phones purchased unlocked without a contract can cost significantly more, starting at $500.

For more buying advice, go to *ConsumerReports.org/cellphones*

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model.	Price	Overall score 0 100 P | F | G | VG | E	Test results Ease of use	Messaging	Web browsing	Display quality	Voice quality	Phoning	Battery life	Camera: Image quality	Camera: Video quality	Portability	Display diagonal size (in.)	Operating system
A		**AT&T SMART PHONES**														
☑	1	**Samsung** Galaxy S III (16GB) (AT&T)	$200	78	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	○	●	4.8	And.
☑	2	**HTC** One X	200	76	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	◒	●	4.7	And.
☑	3	**Samsung** Galaxy S II Skyrocket	150	76	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	●	○	●	4.5	And.
☑	4	**Samsung** Galaxy Note	250	75	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	○	◒	5.3	And.
☑	5	**LG** Nitro HD	50	75	●	●	●	●	◒	●	○	○	◒	●	4.5	And.
☑	6	**HTC** Vivid	50	75	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	4.5	And.
☑	7	**Samsung** Galaxy S II (AT&T)	100	75	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	●	○	●	4.3	And.

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model (Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model.)	Price	Overall score (0 P | F | G | VG | E 100)	Ease of use	Messaging	Web browsing	Display quality	Voice quality	Phoning	Battery life	Camera: Image quality	Camera: Video quality	Portability	Display diagonal size (in.)	Operating system
A		**AT&T SMART PHONES** continued														
☑	8	**Motorola** Atrix 2 4G	$100	74	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	4.3	And.
☑	9	**Apple** iPhone 4S (16GB) AT&T iPhone 4S (64GB) AT&T, iPhone 4S (32GB) AT&T	200	74	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	○	◓	◓	◓	3.5	iOS
☑	10	**Samsung** Galaxy Exhilarate	30	73	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	○	○	◒	◓	4	And.
☑	11	**Nokia** Lumia 900	50	71	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	○	◒	○	○	4.3	WP
☑	12	**HTC** Titan II	200	71	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	○	○	○	○	4.7	WP
☑	13	**Sony** Xperia ion	100	71	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	○	◓	○	◓	4.6	And.
☑	14	**Samsung** Focus 2	50	70	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	○	◓	◒	◓	4	WP
☑	15	**Samsung** Rugby Smart	50	70	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	○	○	◒	◓	3.7	And.
	16	**Apple** iPhone 4 (8GB) AT&T	100	69	◓	◓	○	◓	○	◓	○	○	◓	◓	3.5	iOS
☑	17	**BlackBerry** Torch 9810	100	66	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	○	○	○	◓	3.2	BB
	18	**Apple** iPhone 3G S (8GB)	0	61	◓	◓	○	◓	○	◓	○	◒	○	◓	3.5	iOS
	19	**Pantech** Crossover	0	56	◓	◓	○	○	◒	○	○	◓	●	◓	3	And.
B		**SPRINT NEXTEL SMART PHONES**														
☑	1	**Samsung** Galaxy S III (16GB) (Sprint) Galaxy S III (32GB) (Sprint)	200	76	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	○	◓	○	◓	4.8	And.
☑	2	**HTC** Evo 4G LTE	200	73	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	○	◒	○	◓	4.7	And.
☑	3	**Samsung** Galaxy S II Epic 4G Touch	150	72	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	○	◓	○	◓	4.5	And.
☑	4	**LG** Viper	80	69	◓	◓	◓	◓	◒	◓	○	○	◒	◓	4	And.
☑	5	**Samsung** Epic 4G	100	68	◓	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	○	●	◒	○	4	And.
☑	6	**Apple** iPhone 4S (16GB) Sprint iPhone 4S (32GB) Sprint, iPhone 4S (64GB) Sprint	200	67	◓	◓	○	◓	○	◓	○	◓	◓	◓	3.5	iOS
	7	**Apple** iPhone 4 (8GB) Sprint	100	65	◓	◓	○	◓	○	◓	○	○	◓	◓	3.5	iOS

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B		**SPRINT NEXTEL SMART PHONES** continued														
	8	**Samsung** Conquer 4G	$50	64	⊜	⊖	⊜	○	○	⊖	○	○	◒	⊖	3.5	And.
	9	**BlackBerry** Torch 9850	–	61	⊖	⊖	○	⊜	○	⊖	○	○	○	⊖	3.7	BB
	10	**LG** Optimus Elite	30	58	⊖	⊖	○	⊖	○	○	○	◒	◒	⊜	3.5	And.
	11	**ZTE** Fury	20	56	⊖	⊖	○	⊖	○	⊖	○	○	●	⊖	3.5	And.
	12	**Motorola** XPRT	0	55	⊖	⊖	○	○	○	⊖	○	○	●	○	3.1	And.
	13	**HTC** Arrive	50	54	⊖	⊖	○	⊖	○	⊖	◒	◒	◒	○	3.6	WP
	14	**Samsung** Replenish	0	52	⊖	⊖	◒	○	○	○	○	○	●	⊖	2.8	And.
C		**T-MOBILE SMART PHONES**														
☑	1	**Samsung** Galaxy S III (16GB) (T-Mobile) Galaxy S III (32GB) (T-Mobile)	280	78	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	○	⊜	⊖	⊖	○	⊖	4.8	And.
☑	2	**HTC** One S	200	77	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	○	⊖	⊖	○	○	⊜	4.3	And.
☑	3	**Samsung** Galaxy S II (T-Mobile)	150	75	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	○	⊜	○	⊖	○	⊖	4.5	And.
☑	4	**Samsung** Galaxy S Blaze 4G	0	74	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	○	⊖	○	○	◒	⊖	4	And.
☑	5	**HTC** Amaze 4G	0	74	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	○	⊖	○	○	○	○	4.3	And.
☑	6	**T-Mobile** Sidekick 4G	0	69	⊖	⊜	⊜	⊖	○	⊖	⊖	○	◒	○	3.5	And.
☑	7	**T-Mobile** myTouch 4G	150	69	⊜	⊖	⊖	⊜	○	⊖	○	◒	○	⊖	3.8	And.
☑	8	**HTC** myTouch 4G Slide	150	66	⊖	⊜	⊖	⊖	○	⊖	○	○	○	○	3.7	And.
☑	9	**BlackBerry** Bold 9900 4G	300	66	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊜	○	⊖	○	○	○	⊜	2.8	BB
☑	10	**HTC** Radar 4G	50	66	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	○	⊖	○	○	◒	⊖	3.8	WP
	11	**T-Mobile** Prism	20	58	⊖	⊖	○	⊖	○	⊖	○	◒	◒	⊖	3.5	And.
	12	**BlackBerry** Bold 9780	110	55	○	⊖	◒	⊖	◒	○	○	○	◒	⊖	2.4	BB
D		**VERIZON SMART PHONES**														
☑	1	**Motorola** Droid Razr Maxx	300	78	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊖	○	⊜	⊜	⊖	○	⊖	4.3	And.
☑	2	**Samsung** Galaxy S III (32GB) (Verizon) Galaxy S III (16GB) (Verizon)	250	76	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊜	◒	⊜	○	⊖	○	⊖	4.8	And.
☑	3	**Motorola** Droid Razr	200	75	⊜	⊜	⊜	⊖	○	⊜	○	⊖	○	⊖	4.3	And.

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model.	Price	Overall score 0 100 P | F | G | VG | E	Test results Ease of use	Messaging	Web browsing	Display quality	Voice quality	Phoning	Battery life	Camera: Image quality	Camera: Video quality	Portability	Display diagonal size (in.)	Operating system
		D VERIZON SMART PHONES continued														
✓	4	**LG** Spectrum	$100	73	◒	◒	◒	◒	○	◒	○	○	◒	◒	4.5	And.
✓	5	**Motorola** Droid 4	200	73	◒	◒	◒	◒	○	◒	○	◒	○	○	4	And.
✓	6	**Samsung** Galaxy Nexus	100	72	◒	◒	◒	◒	◒	◒	○	○	○	◒	4.7	And.
✓	7	**Samsung** Stratosphere	100	72	◒	◒	◒	◒	◒	◒	○	○	◒	○	4	And.
✓	8	**LG** Lucid	50	70	◒	◒	◒	◒	◒	◒	○	○	◒	◒	4	And.
✓	9	**Samsung** Droid Charge	50	69	◒	◒	◒	◒	◒	◒	◒	○	○	○	4.3	And.
✓	10	**Apple** iPhone 4S (16GB) Verizon iPhone 4S (64GB) Verizon, iPhone 4S (32GB) Verizon	200	67	◒	◒	○	◒	○	◒	○	◒	◒	◒	3.5	iOS
	11	**Apple** iPhone 4 (8GB) Verizon	100	65	◒	◒	○	◒	○	◒	○	○	◒	◒	3.5	iOS
	12	**Casio** G'zOne Commando	100	60	◒	◒	○	◒	○	◒	◒	○	◒	○	3.6	And.
	13	**BlackBerry** Bold 9930	230	59	◒	◒	○	◒	◒	◒	○	◒	◒	◒	2.8	BB
	14	**Sony** Ericsson Xperia Play	20	57	◒	◒	○	◒	◒	◒	◒	○	◒	○	4	And.
	15	**HTC** Trophy	180	56	◒	◒	○	◒	◒	◒	○	◒	◒	◒	3.8	WP

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is based mainly on test results. **Ease of use** indicates how easy it is to access features and modes, such as phoning, messaging, Web browsing, the camera, etc. **Messaging** assesses keyboard ergonomics, e-mail readability, attachment capabilities, and text-messaging features. **Web browsing** assesses browser capabilities. **Display quality** represents overall picture quality, contrast in normal and bright lighting, and color accuracy. **Voice quality** incorporates listening and talking in noisy and quiet settings using live phone calls. **Phoning** considers the step-saving functions for making and receiving calls, speed dialing, and more. **Battery life** was tested under strong and weak cell network signals, and considers tasks that involve voice, data, standby, and other factors. **Camera: Image quality** evaluates resolution, dynamic range, color accuracy, and visual noise. **Camera: Video quality** judges recorded video images shot at the highest quality setting available. **Portability** represents advantages and disadvantages based on dimensions and weight. **Display diagonal size (in.)** is to the nearest tenth of an inch. Under **operating system,** A is for Android; B, BlackBerry; i, iOS; W, Windows Phone; wOS, web OS. **Price** is approximate retail.

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Apple iPhone 5

Motorola Droid Razr M

LG Optimus G

Smart phones, smart savings

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HTC Evo 4G LTE

Samsung Galaxy S III

BIGGER AND BETTER Smart-phone displays have grown in size and responsiveness, increasing versatility and ease of use.

How important are our smart phones? Just consider how much we're spending on them. The average American household shelled out more than $1,500 on phones and phone service in 2012, and the biggest spenders easily blew through twice that amount. Overall, spending on wireless services was up by 7 percent over 2011, even though many households cut just about every other expenditure they could.

Part of that spending spree came as owners of basic cell phones continued to trade up to their first smart phones, those Web-connected combinations of phone, mini-computer, and micro-compact camera. About 70 percent of Consumer Reports readers who responded to our annual survey on cell-phone service now own a smart phone, up from about 50 percent only two years ago.

Upgrading from a plain cell phone at a major carrier isn't cheap. You have to buy the smart phone itself (usually $100 to $400 when signing a two-year contract) and fork over $70 to $110 a month for a plan with data service. That's a lot more than a basic phone plan, which generally costs $40 to $70 a month.

Even if you already own a smart phone, you might be tempted by the charms of a later model. The best of the new phones—including the Apple iPhone 5 and Samsung Galaxy S III and Note II—offer better cameras, bigger and more responsive screens, and faster processors for speedier Web access and app performance.

Cell-phone service remains among the lowest-rated of those evaluated by the Consumer Reports National Re-

Data-hogging phone habits

It's easy to burn through the 2-gigabyte (that's 2,000 megabytes) monthly allowance of typical data plans, especially if you overdo any of the activities below when connected to the carrier's network. Use Wi-Fi instead of the data network when possible and limit these activities:

1 Watching video streams. A high-quality video stream consumes almost 6MB per minute with a 4G connection. Streaming a video per day from YouTube for a month, or a single HD movie, could eat up 700MB of data—or more than a third of that 2GB budget. Use the phone's settings to reduce the resolution of videos you watch or upload.

2 Making video calls. Face-to-face video calls, using the front-mounted camera found on most new smart phones, eat up a hefty 2.5 to 3MB a minute. Chat for 20 minutes once a week with your daughter at college and you would use up at least 200MB of data per month.

3 Uploading video. Can't wait until a Wi-Fi network is accessible to upload that high-def video from your phone to Facebook? Think twice: Unless it's compressed, a 3-minute video clip in HD (1080p) can be about 300MB.

4 Streaming music. Streaming favorite sounds to your phone from a subscription music service, a collection stored in the cloud, or an Internet radio station eats up a megabyte of data per minute. Listen for a half-hour of commuting on weekdays and during a few 20-minute workouts per week, and you've consumed more than 700MB of data in a month. Consider reducing the bit rate of streams (via settings) and storing music on the device rather than streaming.

5 Playing connected games online. Shooting it out with other players in high-octane online games is way cool—and way costly. With every minute of play requiring a megabyte of data, a half-hour of play three times a week will easily burn through 360MB of data per month.

On the plus side, at least three activities you might think are data hogs usually use less than a megabyte of data per minute: surfing the Web, using maps and navigation, and sending e-mail (at least without attachments). If your phone has a data usage monitor, check it periodically to make sure you don't overdo it.

ILLUSTRATIONS: DAN SIPPLE

search Center. Yet the experiences of the 63,000 respondents to this year's survey offer glimmers of improvement.

As in years past, giant Verizon and smaller Consumer Cellular and U.S. Cellular stood out from the pack for satisfying customers with standard service. But there was also good news for subscribers to the other major carriers—AT&T, Sprint, and T-Mobile. Customers of all three who owned phones that connect to faster 4G networks (as does almost every phone they now sell under contract) were consistently more satisfied than subscribers with 3G who remain in the cellular slow lane.

Even the long-suffering patrons of lower-rated AT&T had something positive to report: They had the fewest problems—interrupted, downgraded, slow, or no service—with 4G service of any carrier.

Plans cost the same for 4G-capable and 3G-capable phones, but faster phones and faster connections can lead to higher bills. The two biggest carriers, AT&T and Verizon, have dropped their unlimited data plans for new customers, just as more people are buying smart phones and 4G networks allow you to tear through the megabytes. For example, in a 2011 study of 185,000 phone lines by Validas, a company that tracks cell usage and recommends plan savings, owners of the HTC Thunderbolt, an older 4G smart phone, used an average of 1GB of data per month. That's almost double the 565MB average usage by owners of iPhones, all of which accessed only 3G networks at the time of the study.

Many smart-phone owners may be unaware of all the ways their usage patterns can run up data consumption. And it's not only data charges driving up costs. Carriers continue to swell bills with pesky charges such as a new-phone upgrade fee of $30 at Verizon; AT&T has pushed its own upgrade fee from $18 to $36.

It's little wonder that for the first half of 2012, AT&T and Verizon were crowing to investors about profit margins of 41 and 50 percent, respectively. The latter isn't just a Verizon record. "It's one of the highest ever recorded for wireless carriers around the world," says Phil Cusick, the telecom stock analyst for J.P.Morgan.

AT&T, Sprint, and T-Mobile 4G users were happier than 3G users.

There are few signs that consumers won't pay for better phones and better service, but we offer ways to save—and be more satisfied, too—no matter what phone and plan you choose.

Phones get smarter

Although they've achieved a high standard, smart phones vary in performance and price, even among the recommended models in the Ratings.

Displays get better and bigger. Within the past year, more phones have sharper displays, with 720p resolution and higher pixel counts per inch. They're also more accurate with colors and easier to read in bright light. And typical screen size is edging up, with a norm of at least 4.3 inches for our recommended models.

Two new phones exemplify how manufacturers are making the extra real estate of the biggest screens work better for the user: the Samsung Galaxy Note II, whose 5.5-inch display is the new size champion among phones, and the LG Intuition, a 5-incher. Both let you write with a finger or stylus on top of photos, calendar appointments, e-mail messages, or other displayed content and share the content and note as an image via e-mail, messaging, or social networks. In portrait mode, phones also allow you to shrink the keyboard and slide it to either side of the screen to help smaller thumbs reach the farthest keys.

Cameras improve. Despite having much tinier lenses and image sensors, the best smart-phone cameras challenge subcompact cameras and compact camcorders in image quality. That said, smart-phone cameras have limits. Their performance in low light is generally worse than that of stand-alone cameras, and they have a slower maximum frame rate than camcorders (30 frames per second vs. 60 fps), resulting in less fluidity in video images. And so far no smart phone offers optical zoom-lens capability, although rising resolution (8 megapixels or more on many phones) should limit the degradation in quality as images are enlarged.

More smart phones, fewer exclusives. The basic cell phone isn't dead, but its smart sibling is edging it out. The major carriers now offer only a handful of basic phones, most of them sold by their prepaid subsidiaries or partners. And many basic models sold with contracts cost almost as much as an entry-level smart phone. Six of 10 basic phones from Verizon, for example, cost $80 or more with a two-year contract.

When to get a new smart phone

It might seem unnecessary to replace a working smart phone at the end of the customary 24-month contract period for most plans. But two factors make it smart to consider spending $200 or so to get a new phone when you're eligible to do so:

You'll pay for a new one, anyway. Unless you opt to switch to a prepaid plan once your contract obligations are fulfilled (see "Which Phone & Plan?" on page 34), your monthly bill will probably continue at the same cost as before. That bill will include the amount the carrier sets aside to repay itself the difference (usually at least $300) between what you paid for the smart phone and what the carrier paid the manufacturer for it.

In other words, after your contract is up, you'll essentially be paying toward a new phone whether you get one or not. So why not get something for your money?

Your old phone will show its age. Operating systems and apps are designed and updated for the newest smart phones, with their faster processors, expanded memory, larger and sharper displays, improved cameras, and more. Accepting over-the-air updates to your operating system and apps when prompted to do so helps stave off obsolescence, and deleting apps you no longer use helps. But within a few years, your phone could struggle to muster the processing power, memory, or features it needs to make the most of new apps or an upgraded operating system—if it can accept them at all.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sell, trade, or recycle

You can sell your old phone privately on Craigslist or eBay or to a company such as Gazelle, which in November was offering $160 for a 16GB iPhone 4S, for example. Some phone manufacturers have trade-in programs. You could donate it to an organization such as Recycling for Charities or give it to someone. (Make sure you delete personal data.) Or simply keep the phone in case you lose or damage a new one and don't want to replace it until your contract expires and you're eligible for a new discounted phone.

Android phone, iPhone, or Windows Phone? How they compare

You now have three flavors of smart phone to choose from: Android phones, iPhones, and Windows Phones. (BlackBerry is still around but is geared mostly toward business use, so we won't cover it here.) Here's how they compare, with examples of available phones:

Android OS

The phones If you want a wide choice of phones, you've come to the right place. There are half a dozen brands offering scads of phones that run on the Android operating system. Displays are the biggest around, as large as 5.5 inches, and this platform is the only one other than BlackBerry that has phones with a physical keyboard. Android phones stand out for innovative features such as Wi-Fi Direct, facial recognition, NFC for wireless sharing and mobile payments.
Apps and more Google Play carries a wide selection of music, apps, e-books, and other content from phone carriers, phone manufacturers, and providers such as Amazon.com. Payments through your Google account are easy, but sometimes you have to pay the carrier or app provider.
The interface The Android OS is as customizable as they come, thanks to a wide variety of widgets and other built-in tools for tweaking phone controls, as well as its look and feel. You can organize apps into folders, and you don't have to clutter your home screens with every app you own. Little-used apps can remain in a separate app drawer until you need them. But the interface and features can vary significantly from phone to phone, and OS updates can radically change features.

Samsung Galaxy S III
Price range $200 to $330 with two-year contract, including rebates. A brilliant 4.8-inch display, clever HD cameras, and ingenious options for sharing make the Galaxy S III ideal for social networkers.

Apple iOS

The phones There's only one product line to choose from, and only one new model is introduced each year. These models complement their sleek, trend-setting designs and intuitively simple operation with top-notch displays, cameras, and music players. iPhone 5, the first iPhone with a 4-inch display and support for fast 4G LTE data networks, is the best one yet. But these LTE phones can't simultaneously support a phone call and an Internet-based connection over the cellular network.
Apps and more If it's apps you want, Apple is the hands-down winner. The selection of music, video, games, and apps from iTunes and the App Store is simply unrivaled. And it's easy and safe to buy via your iTunes account. You'll also find accessories galore—cases, compatible devices, and more.
The interface The simple iOS interface is ultra-easy to master. Consistency is another plus: iOS, which hasn't changed much in years, is the same from carrier to carrier and almost identical to that of the iPad. You can create folders to organize apps, but you can customize the interface only minimally, and the screen can become cluttered.

Apple iPhone 5
Price range $200 to $400 with two-year contract, including rebates. The innovative iPhone 5 is a major step up from earlier models, including the recommended 4S. It retains its simple, familiar interface while boosting the IQ of Siri, the savvy voice assistant, and making the top-notch iPhone camera even better.

Windows Phone

The phones Windows Phone is still playing catch-up, and there's only a small selection of phones from HTC, Nokia, and Samsung. Many of them have screens 4 inches or larger, and all let you launch the camera from a locked screen, even when it's protected by a personal identification number. The newest models support NFC technology for wireless sharing and mobile payments.
Apps and more You'll find a fairly small selection of music, video, apps, games (including Xbox), and other content from Microsoft, phone carriers, and phone manufacturers, nothing yet to compare with Android or Apple. You can pay via a Microsoft account in many cases, though sometimes you have to pay the carrier or app provider directly.
The interface Windows Phone is simple yet flexible, residing on two scrollable main panels. One panel houses apps, and the other has resizable Live Tiles that can display updates from social-network feeds and other sources. Large, colorful fonts provide a clear, distinctive presentation of e-mail, calendars, and other phone content. It has a similar look and feel to Windows 8 computers and tablets. But you can't create folders to organize apps, and panels can get unmanageably long.

Nokia Lumia 920
Price $100 from AT&T with a two-year contract. It has unique advanced features such as wireless charging based on magnetic induction. One cool feature: You can erase people from photos, say, when shooting a landscape.

Even many cell phones from prepaid carriers such as Virgin Mobile and Tracfone are now less basic, adding features such as Web browsers and app stores that require data service. And the simple smart phones that prepaid carriers mostly offer are increasingly supplemented by some marquee models.

There's also less exclusivity. Carriers still have some phones that are theirs alone—Motorola's top-of-the-line Droid Razrs are sold only by Verizon, for example—but fewer than in the past. The days when iPhones, for example, were available only from AT&T are long gone. The iPhone 5 is now available from three of the four major carriers as well as prepaid carrier Cricket. The highly rated Samsung Galaxy S III is offered with a contract by the big four carriers as well as Credo Mobile and U.S. Cellular, smaller carriers that got high marks in our Ratings. You can also get it prepaid from MetroPCS.

Data plans are changing

Satisfaction scores with cell-phone service may be unchanged overall, but the following developments are addressing some old gripes while creating a few new ones.

Data plans get metered. The shift to selling data in measured tiers may actually have benefited some smart-phone owners. Among respondents to our survey who switched to a metered data plan, 21 percent saved up to $20 a month and 16 percent said they saved more than $20. Those savings may result from subscribers fine-tuning their purchases by buying as little as 300MB for their smart phone for $20 a month at AT&T, for example, rather than the previous $30 charge for overbuying unlimited data. On the downside, 10 percent of respondents who switched said they paid up to $20 more per month on a metered plan, and 9 percent saw their bill rise

by more than $20 a month. At Verizon, for one, the price of 1GB of data a month, the minimum required by most smart-phone customers, has shot up to $50. Previously, Verizon charged $30 for 2GB and before that $30 for an unlimited 3G data plan.

You might still see so-called unlimited plans advertised, but of the four major carriers, only Sprint offers truly unlimited data plans. AT&T, T-Mobile, and Verizon all reduce the download speed under certain circumstances on grandfathered and new "unlimited" plans—when you reach a data cap, for instance, or when the network is busy—a practice known as throttling. It's usually allowed by the fine print in your service contract.

Data becomes shareable. Because they've all but ended truly unlimited data service, AT&T and Verizon now let customers share "buckets" of metered data among multiple family members and devices. They've also moved more toward making voice and messaging unlimited, and seemingly free, in those shared data plans. In reality, though, you pay for both through a per-device access fee of $40 (Verizon) or $30 to $45 (AT&T) per smart phone per month. You can add devices other than phones to the plans, at access fees of $20 per laptop and $10 per tablet.

Overage alerts are now in place. When users exceed their data, voice, or texting limits, carriers impose overage charges that can result in shockingly high cellular bills. This year, after prodding by the Federal Communications Commission and Consumers Union, the advocacy arm of Consumer Reports, CTIA-The Wireless Association agreed that its member carriers will warn customers via e-mail and text before and after they hit their limits.

You can now get hot new phones even from some prepaid carriers.

But you should still be mindful of your limits and react by reducing usage or switching to a higher monthly bucket of voice minutes, data, or messages. Thirteen percent of our readers surveyed last September who switched from unlimited to limited data plans said they were hit with overage fees at least once. Our 2010 survey found that more than half of those who went over their voice, text, or data limits incurred penalties of at least $50.

How to save

The plan you pick and the cell-phone retailer you choose are likely to affect your cost of owning a particular phone far more than the price of the phone itself.

Haggle for the phone. Most shoppers don't think to negotiate for a lower cell-phone price, but 17 percent of our cell-phone-buying survey respondents took a shot. Of that group, more than one in four succeeded. The median discount won was $54, but a handful of hagglers knocked $100 or more off the price.

Consider a prepaid phone plan. A no-contract plan is now worth serious consideration. Phones are better, reader satisfaction with prepaid service is relatively high, and service costs are lower.

You can pay $250 more to buy the same phone from a no-contract carrier vs. a major provider, because the no-contract carrier can't be assured of recovering some of the phone's subsidized discount price through a two-year contract term.

Protect the data on your phone

In a recent survey, half of Consumer Reports readers who own a cell phone told us they use their phones in ways that put their passwords, account numbers, and other sensitive information at risk. Yet one out of three of them didn't take any steps to protect themselves. If they were to lose their phone, strangers could pore through their data, send malicious texts or e-mail that seem to be from them, and order merchandise from accounts they've set up. Here's how to minimize your risk:

Lock your phone

- Consider using a personal identification number or password on your phone so that others won't be able to browse your life history or embark on an online spending spree. That tactic requires you to balance security and convenience, because you'll have to enter a code every time your phone screen locks. To minimize the hassle, you could set a fairly long interval before your phone times out, say, 30 minutes.
- Install an app that can locate a phone and remotely lock it or even erase its data. Options include Find My iPhone (free on iTunes) and Lookout for Android-based phones (free at Google Play). The Lookout app can back up your data. Other free backup services are the iCloud for iPhones and, for Android phones, Google Cloud Storage, Verizon's Backup Assistant, and AT&T's Mobile Backup. For Windows Phone devices, use SkyDrive.

Keep apps in check

Many consumers realize there are at least some inherent risks in downloading apps to a phone but don't understand the extent to which they compromise privacy, according to a nationally representative survey conducted recently by the Consumer Reports National Research Center.

Eighty-one percent of respondents recognized that apps—even from reputable, well-known companies—can access personal information stored on a phone and share it with others. But almost 60 percent of those surveyed believed sharing data was illegal unless the phone's owner explicitly agreed to that. And 53 percent thought it was illegal for an app maker with a privacy policy to share the user's personal information with other companies. In fact, there are no legal protections against sharing this information. But three-quarters of survey respondents did realize that app markets, including Apple's App Store and Google Play, don't prevent app developers from sharing their information.

With smart-phone apps from any source:

- See what permissions you've granted installed apps (under Settings/Apps for Android phones and Settings/Privacy for iPhones). Uninstall any that are too nosy.
- Before downloading an app, scrutinize the permissions it requests. Reject any that want to do something suspicious, such as tracking your location if that seems unnecessary.

Don't get personal

When going online, be careful about disclosing personal information. Before selling or discarding a phone, wipe out your data by resetting the phone to the factory default. And remove SIM cards and memory cards, if applicable.

But monthly bills are usually lower for prepaid service, especially from prepaid specialists such as MetroPCS, which offers low-cost unlimited-everything plans. Prefer a big national carrier? AT&T, T-Mobile, and Verizon also offer prepaid service. Sprint does so through its Boost and Virgin brands.

Two-thirds of our survey respondents knocked more than $20 a month off their bill by switching to prepaid, and 17 percent saved up to $20 a month. Over two years, you can recoup the extra cost of the phone and more. Here's a tip: If you're coming off contract with a phone you like, you can often transfer that phone to a prepaid plan with your current carrier or a new one and pay less for service comparable to what you had on contract.

Be careful when upgrading early. Unless you're totally fed up with your current phone, try to stick with it until the contract runs out. If you upgrade early, you'll be hit with penalties and surcharges, including paying full price for the new phone. See "Can't Wait for That Must-Have Phone?" on page 36 for details.

Think twice about insurance or an extended warranty. It can easily cost $500 to $600 to replace a popular smart phone in midcontract, as salespeople pushing protection plans will remind you. But in our survey of cell-phone buyers, we found that only 15 percent polled bought a new phone because the old one broke, and only 2 percent bought one because their phone was lost or stolen.

Based on that, the value of insurance or an extended warranty seems questionable. That's especially true when you consider what a plan costs and what you get for the money. Phone replacement coverage can cost $5 to $9 a month and can come with a $50 to $150 deductible. Yet you might be entitled only to a repaired, refurbished phone rather than a new one.

Even so, close to one in three survey respondents purchased additional protection against loss or damage to their phone. Many said they felt it necessary to protect their investment in the phone.

But here's a better idea: Keep your old phone until the new handset's contract ends. If you lose or break the new phone, reactivate the old one by contacting the carrier and then syncing to your accounts to download contacts and more to the device. Then use the old model until you qualify for a free or discounted new phone.

Overview

We recommend all of the retailers in our Ratings because each was satisfactory to a majority of survey respondents. Stores we call out below stand out for the reasons noted.

BEST BUYING EXPERIENCE OVERALL

A1 Apple.com
B1 Apple Store

Whether shopping online or in walk-in stores, those who bought a smart phone at an Apple Store or online had a better overall experience than shoppers at any other store.

GREAT PRICES AND SERVICE

B2 Costco

With dedicated wireless kiosks in every store, the warehouse retailer delivers pleasing service along with its customary low prices and limited selection—which doesn't include iPhones. Costco charges an annual membership fee, usually $55.

OTHER STANDOUT OPTIONS

B3 U.S. Cellular
B5 Walmart
B6 Best Buy

U.S. Cellular was the best carrier walk-in store; only Apple Stores offered a better service and checkout experience. Walmart matched Costco for pleasing prices, and Best Buy is unequalled in selection, offering a variety of phones—such as iPhones, 4G Android phones, and simple prepaid phones—from a host of carriers.

Ratings Cell-phone stores

In order of reader score, within types.

Better ← → Worse

Order	Retailer	Reader score (0–100)	Survey results: Service	Checkout	Price	Selection	Website quality	Shipping
A	**ONLINE STORES**							
1	Apple.com	88	●	●	◒	○	●	●
2	VerizonWireless.com	76	○	○	◒	○	○	◓
3	att.com (AT&T)	73	○	○	○	○	○	◓
B	**WALK-IN STORES**							
1	Apple Store	87	●	●	◒	○	●	●
2	Costco	81	◓	○	◓	◒	○	–
3	U.S. Cellular	80	◓	◓	○	◒	–	–
4	RadioShack	78	○	○	○	○	–	–
5	Walmart	78	●	○	◓	●	–	–
6	Best Buy	77	○	○	○	◓	○	–
7	Independents	76	○	○	◒	○	–	–
8	Sprint	74	○	○	◒	○	◒	○
9	AT&T	74	○	○	◒	○	●	○
10	Verizon	73	○	○	●	○	◒	○
11	T-Mobile	69	◒	◒	●	◒	◒	○
C	**SALES BY PHONE**							
1	Verizon	74	–	○	◒	○	○	◓

Guide to the Ratings

Results are based on 9,774 responses from Consumer Reports subscribers who bought a new cell phone in the past two years. Survey results may not reflect the U.S. population as a whole. **Reader score** represents overall satisfaction with the retail experience. If all respondents were completely satisfied with a particular retailer, the reader score would be 100; a score of 80 indicates that respondents were "very satisfied" on average; 60, "fairly well satisfied." Differences of fewer than 6 points are not meaningful. **Survey results** reflect mean scores on a scale from "very poor" to "excellent." **Service** reflects Web support for online retailers, sales help for walk-in stores.

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Hot new tablets

Three recent arrivals are welcome additions to the market

RAPID CHANGES in tablets are bringing more choices, new features, and better prices. Here's a rundown based on our initial tests (we'll fully test all of them soon):

Apple squeezed its highly successful iPad into a more affordable and smaller package, the iPad Mini. Our tests found Apple's new tablet as good as its larger siblings in almost every respect. We also found it more convenient for reading because it's smaller and lighter. For details, see the facing page.

Microsoft finally entered the market with a serious competitor to the iPad and Android tablets—the Surface with Windows RT (the new operating system for tablets based on Windows 8.) Larger than most tablets, the Surface is a fine piece of hardware, with a built-in stand, great add-on keyboards, and an excellent display. It runs versions of classic Office applications. But Microsoft has a ways to go on its app store.

The Barnes & Noble Nook got a major update with the 7-inch Nook HD and 9-inch Nook HD+. The Nook HD has the highest screen resolution among smaller tablets, and Barnes & Noble kept the starting price at $200, a true bargain. It also improved the shopping experience and added other innovative features, such as user profiles. The Nook HD+ starts at $270.

These new tablets lived up to expectations in many ways, our preliminary tests showed. But as with other tablets, if you also want a physical keyboard, you must pay extra. For our assessment of the variety of add-on tablet keyboards, see page 22.

The Nook HD delivers on its display

The Barnes & Noble Nook HD is the highest-resolution tablet of its size. Priced at $200 for 8GB ($230 for 16GB), it has a screen whose resolution is 243 pixels per inch. That's not much less than the 264 pixels per inch on the third- and fourth-generation iPad with Retina display. Here's how it stacked up in our preliminary tests:

Images and text look great. Its 7-inch screen lived up to expectations, delivering images that nearly equaled those of the Apple iPad Retina screens. Viewing angles were similar to the iPad's, as was the ability to read in bright light. We did find that colors weren't quite up to iPad standards, thanks to slightly yellow, less-saturated colors. And we found the text on the Nook HD almost as crisp as the iPad's.

Magazines are a strength. At 0.7 pounds, the Nook HD is among the lightest tablets and narrow enough to fit in one hand. So it almost feels as if you're holding a small magazine. It's certainly better for reading one than the previous Nook, which squeezed text into a narrow column. On the Nook HD, text fills the entire screen. Scrolling is smooth and magazine pages curl as you turn.

If you're an avid magazine reader, however, you'll probably prefer the Nook HD+, whose display is larger and has a slightly squarer shape, making it better suited to publications. It can accommodate an entire page of type without forcing you to clumsily scroll around the page as you read. It wasn't available to test at press time.

HI-RES DUO **The Nook HD and HD+ nearly match the resolution of the Apple Retina display.**

Video and audio were fine. Streaming video appeared quite good on the Nook HD. Sound was less tinny than you'd expect on a device this size, but still not as loud as on the new iPad Mini. Touch response was also fine, and games that require swiping were easy to play. But photos that you view in landscape mode have black task and status bars above and below the shot, shrinking it.

Unique features are helpful. Both Nooks have features that distinguish them from other tablets we've seen. For example, you can set up as many as six personalized accounts on a single device.

You select an account by dragging its icon to open up the associated user's profile, which contains that user's books, magazines, apps, and scrapbooks. With parental controls, you can set up children's accounts that restrict their ability to browse, shop, or access files in the device's library.

Scrapbooks are another useful feature. When reading a magazine or catalog, you can clip a page and add it to a scrapbook by dragging two fingers down the side of a page or by using an onscreen scissor icon that you summon with a touch.

Bottom line. If you're looking for a small tablet, the Nook HD is a fine choice at an excellent price. It's quite portable, even compared with other 7-inch tablets. The sharp text that the high-resolution display renders should especially please readers.

While the selection of content and "curated" apps is more limited than the iPad's, or even those in a number of other Android stores, it's enough for most people, especially given its broad selection of magazines.

A fine iPad in a small package

If you're looking for a more portable and affordable iPad, the iPad Mini delivers, our preliminary tests found. Apple has managed to shrink most of what's good about the 9.7-inch iPad into a smaller package.

It's midsized, yet thin and light. With a 7.8-inch screen, the Mini offers more real estate than 7-inch Android tablets. But bigger doesn't mean heavier. In fact, it weighs just under 0.7 pounds, the same as the lightest 7-inch tablets and roughly half as much as a full-sized iPad. It's also the thinnest tablet we've seen.

The screen is good enough. Resolution is much lower than on the newest full-sized iPad or Nook HD. But the crisp text holds its own against the best 7-inch tablets and the non-Retina iPad 2. Colors and viewing angles actually match those of the Retina display.

It's fine for media. When you're viewing photos on the Mini, each image fills the entire screen, without the black bars around the photo that waste screen space on other tablets. The Mini's cameras—720p video in the front and 5MP in the rear—are the same as on the latest full-sized iPad. The audio is less rich than the full-sized iPad's but just as loud. The Mini even one-ups the larger iPad's mono speaker with its own pair of stereo speakers, though you must be really close to hear the stereo effect.

It feels like an iPad. Apple maintained the iPad experience for reading or using apps. Magazines look great, book text is fine, and with the Mini's size and weight, reading won't tire you quickly. A game that ran on a full-sized iPad worked the same on the Mini.

A 16GB, Wi-Fi Mini costs $330; with 3G/4G capability, $460. Models with 32GB and 64GB are also available at higher prices.

Bottom line. In shrinking the iPad, Apple didn't compromise much. Instead, it produced a tablet that's better suited, in important ways, for reading.

SKINNY MINI The iPad Mini is the thinnest tablet we've seen.

NEW KID Microsoft's tablet (shown with optional keyboard) is strong on design.

Windows finds its touch in Surface tablet

Microsoft's new 10.6-inch Surface tablet with Windows RT arrived as we went to press. Here's what our testers found:

An excellent display. The screen rivals that of the iPad in some ways but falls short in others. Viewing angles were as good as those on the full-sized iPad. Colors also looked great. The display was as bright as those on the best tablets we've tested, making it quite readable in a brightly lit environment.

Microsoft says the technology the Surface uses produces sharp text and very detailed photos. Text did look good, but it wasn't as sharp as on the iPad and Nook. Photos had less detail than on an iPad. Videos looked good, but the speakers sounded weaker and more muffled than on an iPad. Volume controls were easy to access when the Surface was on its stand.

It's not a PC. Windows RT, a version of Windows 8 designed for tablets, can run apps from the Windows Store and special versions of Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and OneNote.

Even though it's Windows-based, the Surface doesn't run traditional computer applications, such as Quicken or Photoshop. To use those on a Microsoft tablet, you need the more powerful Surface with Windows 8 Pro, which can also run the apps from the Windows Store. That Surface model wasn't available at press time.

Apps are limited. The shelves at the Windows Store looked somewhat bare. There was no Facebook or Twitter app, for example, both of which are available for iPad and Android tablets. Microsoft says new apps are coming daily. As with other app stores, the Windows Store lets you install any app that you buy on multiple devices—five in this case. You can buy movies and music from Xbox services.

Thin but heavy. The Surface with Windows RT is as thin as the thinnest 10-inch tablets. But at 1.5 pounds, it's heavy. It's also longer than the smaller, squarer iPad. Its weight and shape work against the Surface when you hold it for an extended period.

A stand and keyboards help. A built-in stand helps support it at a comfortable angle on a desk or table. Two optional, well-designed Microsoft keyboards—the Touch Cover and the Type Cover—help, too.

The Touch Cover is thin but full-sized. Its flat surface requires more pressure when typing than you might be used to, but its audible feedback helps. An oddity we found: When we folded it under the tablet and laid it on a metal surface, the tablet went to sleep. The Type Cover is thin, too, but more like a traditional keyboard. Both models attach to the Surface using magnets.

A flexible interface. Windows RT uses the same "live" tile interface that the Windows 8 computers and phones run. The Mail tile, for example, continuously displays your most recent e-mail. The Photo tile cycles through your photo library. There's also a tile on the screen for each app you install, which you tap to launch the app. The interface is customizable. You can change the size of many tiles and rearrange them.

The 32GB Wi-Fi Surface costs $500 without the Touch Cover. You can save $20 off the cost of buying a Touch Cover separately by bundling the pair for $600. A 64GB version of the Surface with the Touch Cover costs $700.

Bottom line. The Surface has a lot going for it, including an excellent display. But if you're a serious online user, you'll find the software selection limited, even with apps such as Word and Excel. Xbox content may keep you entertained, but Microsoft has a long way to go before its store compares with the stores for iPads and Android tablets.

Tablet keyboards make typing a snap

If you find your tablet's onscreen keyboard awkward to use for more than a short time, consider one of these add-ons:

Apple Wireless Keyboard $70
Compatible with: All iPads.
What we like. It's small, weighs 0.7 pounds, has large keys, including some shortcuts, and can be used with Mac computers.
What we don't like. Buttons aren't customized for iPad, so some serve no purpose. There's no stand, or Home or Lock button. It uses two AA cells, which you must replace.
Bottom line. Its small size makes it well suited for traveling.

Logitech Tablet Keyboard for Android 3.0+ $70
Compatible with: Tablets running Android 3.0 and above.
What we like. It has large keys with tablet controls and shortcuts. It doubles as a stand.
What we don't like. At 1.1 pounds (with case), it's a bit heavy. It uses four AAA cells that you must replace. It lacks Screen Lock and Brightness controls.
Bottom line. It's versatile and compatible with a variety of Android tablets.

Logitech Ultrathin Keyboard Cover $100
Compatible with: iPad 2 and later.
What we like. It weighs 0.7 pounds. As a stand, it's very stable. There are customized keys for important functions. The built-in battery is rechargeable.
What we don't like. The keys are slightly smaller than on some other models.
Bottom line. Even with the stand, it's lightweight and portable.

Samsung Galaxy Tab 10.1 Keyboard Dock $80
Compatible with: 10.1-inch Galaxy Tab.
What we like: The dock has controls, such as Home, Menu, and Lock Screen, plus app shortcuts. The stand is handy for long periods of typing, and the dock has an additional speaker port.
What we don't like. At 1.3 pounds, it's a bit heavier than the Galaxy Tab itself. The tablet can be used only in landscape mode.
Bottom line. Versatile and easier to use than typing on the screen.

Targus Bluetooth Wireless Keyboard $65
Compatible with: iPad, Android, Windows (all versions).
What we like. It's very portable and weighs 0.7 pounds. It has large keys, including a number of keys for shortcuts.
What we don't like. It isn't customized for specific models. There's no stand or case. It uses two AAA cells that you have to replace periodically.
Bottom line. This is a good choice if you're on a budget and travel often.

Zagg Zaggfolio Keyboard Case $100
Compatible with: iPad 2 and later, Samsung Galaxy Tab 10.1 (different models).
What we like. It has large keys and doubles as a protective case and stand. There are tablet-specific keys and shortcuts. The battery is rechargeable.
What we don't like. It's bulky and weighs 1.2 pounds. The model for the Galaxy Tab 10.1 is a very tight fit for that tablet.
Bottom line. It's a lot more versatile than other keyboards.

Two models for the Surface

Microsoft Touch Cover $120
Microsoft Type Cover $130
Compatible with: Microsoft Surface RT.
What we like. Both are thin, can double as a cover, and have full-sized keys and a convenient touchpad. The Touch Cover weighs 0.4 pounds, and the Type Cover weighs 0.5 pounds.
What we don't like. The tablet can be used only in landscape mode. The Touch Cover's flat surface can take some getting used to, but the Type Cover's keys move when you press them.
Bottom line. Both are well suited to traveling.

Do you need an accident-protection plan? Probably not.

In a recent survey of readers who bought a new tablet since 2010, almost one in five bought a service contract or extended warranty for the device. The figure was about one in four for those who bought iPads.

The leading reason by far for getting a plan, cited by 59 percent of buyers, was to cover accidental damage. But like most extended warranties, a protection plan for a tablet isn't really a good buy, our data suggest. For example, only 4 percent of the 7,217 tablet owners in the survey, conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center, had repaired their tablet for any reason. And the vast majority of those tablets had been repaired within their first year, when many might well have been covered by the manufacturer's warranty or the free insurance provided by some credit cards.

Though it's true that manufacturer warranties don't cover accidents, fewer than half of the repairs in the survey were made for that reason. And only 8 percent of those who bought a warranty had used it for a repair.

Plans don't come cheap, either. The median price respondents paid for AppleCare, Apple's extended plan for iPads, was $82 and, for non-iPad tablets, $61. AppleCare also has a $49 per-incident charge for repairs due to an accident. And should your iPad be damaged, you won't necessarily get a brand-new replacement. Plan terms allow for repairs to be made to your unit or for it to be replaced with a refurbished unit.

If you must buy a plan to cover accidents, try to pay as little as possible. For an iPad, consider accidental coverage that's cheaper than AppleCare, such as the $28, two-year accidental plan sold at Walmart.

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Which phone and plan?

Best combination of device, carrier, and plan for you

You're buying for a crowd

You're a couple plus at least one child who use multiple devices (perhaps including a tablet or two) in a variety of ways.

Leading option: An array of phones—smart and basic, new and old—used with a well-priced family plan that shares data and offers ample voice and messaging for at least three users. Two-year cost for four phones and service: about $5,000 and up.

Service: Family plans from standard-service carriers are one area where cell customers get a break, and more than two-thirds of users are on such plans. Consider U.S. Cellular if you live in its service area. It was one of the top carriers in the Consumer Reports National Research Center annual survey, which covered 23 metro areas. It offers one of the lowest-priced family plans—$190 a month for a family needing two basic and two smart phones. The plan includes 2,000 voice minutes, unlimited messages, and 4GB of data service.

Credo Mobile (which uses the Sprint network yet rates higher than Sprint on every measure), is another good option at the same price and limits. Although Credo doesn't carry as many phones as the majors, it offers the Samsung Galaxy S II and S III among its 10 smart phones.

Verizon should be our example family's third choice. It offers a plan comparable to the one above for $210 per month. AT&T and T-Mobile cost the same or less—$210 and $180, respectively—but they're lower-rated on service quality. The appropriate Sprint plan would be the most expensive of the six carriers we compared, $230 a month.

For $10 a month you can add a tablet to your plan with AT&T, T-Mobile, and Verizon. You may need to spring for more data as well. All three provide average or better 4G service.

Phones: The handset needs of specific family members can vary widely, so we can't recommend one model that would suit everyone. Consult our Ratings on page 38. That said, consider a mix of smart and basic phones. If you're buying more than one phone at a time, look for discounts—or simply ask, because some readers have been successful in haggling for them.

You want the best

You're an avid smart-phone user, perhaps the owner of an iPhone or a leading Android model who's eager to upgrade to a newer version. And you want service that makes the most of such a device.

Leading option: A top-scoring smart phone to use with 4G LTE service from a carrier with top scores, especially for data satisfaction. Two-year cost for phone and service: about $2,500 and up.

Service: With its superior scores and wide array of marquee phones, Verizon is your best bet overall among national carriers. AT&T, though it rates lower than Verizon in most respects, is also worth considering for want-it-all types because of its top 4G network rating and lower pricing for individuals who have lighter data, voice, and messaging needs.

But although AT&T offers a 300MB per month data plan add-on at $20, an avid user with a 4G phone will want at least 2GB, and possibly more. AT&T's voice plans for individuals offer an option with 3GB of data—ample for most people—for $30 a

BY THE NUMBERS

Survey respondents who used the Web on their phones went online about as often as they made calls. Here's how they used their phones:

26%
accessed websites 10 or more times a day.

22%
made voice calls 10 or more times a day.

month. Verizon's data-share plan, the only option for new 4G customers, charges a hefty $60 for a 2GB plan. But voice and texting can be pricier with AT&T. That makes it more expensive to get a plan from AT&T rather than Verizon if you need 2GB of data plus unlimited voice and texting.

U.S. Cellular was top-rated almost across the board but isn't nationally available and has only two high-profile phones, the Samsung Galaxy S III and Galaxy Note II. But if that phone appeals, this carrier is worth considering if you live in one of the 24 states where it's available (in the Midwest, Pacific Coast, and parts of New England and the South). Plan pricing tends to be on par with AT&T, but readers judged U.S. Cellular to be a much better value than any of the four biggest carriers.

No prepaid carrier that has favorable data scores in our Ratings offers any of the hottest smart phones.

Phone: The Apple iPhone 5 and Samsung Galaxy S III are available from Verizon and AT&T starting at $200. Any of the recommended 4G AT&T and Verizon models from our smart-phone Ratings should suit your needs as well.

Smart but not fancy

You want what a smart phone offers, including apps, e-mail, and Web surfing. But you don't crave the cutting-edge features and jumbo screens of the hottest new models, and you can settle for OK service—especially if forgoing extras saves you money.

Leading option: Buy a smart phone that performs well, maybe an older model. Use it with an inexpensive unlimited voice, texting, and data plan from a no-contract carrier with standout scores for data service. Two-year cost for phone and service: about $1,500 and up.

Service: A leading nationally available option is prepaid Straight Talk, which was more satisfying overall than contract service from any major carrier. It received data scores on a par with Verizon. (Some of its phones use the Verizon network.)

Straight Talk also scored highly for value; it charges $45 a month for unlimited data, voice, and messaging, half as much as Verizon's least expensive plan. There's also no contract. If you're unsure about whether you really need a smart phone or will like Straight Talk, you can quit the service at any time and sell your phone or switch it to another carrier without paying an early-termination penalty.

Another leading prepaid-carrier option is Virgin Mobile, which also received high marks for value and data satisfaction.

Phone: You might pay more for a smart phone bought without a contract, but you should recoup the price difference within a matter of months through the lower monthly service fees.

Straight Talk has the Samsung Galaxy S II, a 4G phone (an older model that costs $100 with a two-year contract from AT&T) for $350. Virgin has the HTC Evo V 4G for $300 and HTC One V 3G for $200.

You can also spend less—as little as $99 or so—for competent smart phones from prepaid carriers. The phones usually have smaller screens and less impressive cameras than the phones mentioned above, among other differences.

Just the basics

You're among the 29 percent of our readers who get along without mobile Web and the 59 percent who make no more than a few cellular voice calls a day. Or perhaps you're buying a first cell phone for your tween or young teen and want to keep data costs and usage down.

Leading option: An inexpensive voice-and-texting arrangement from a no-contract carrier, for use with a basic flip, slider, or keyboard phone. Two-year cost for phone and service: about $200 and up.

Service: Consider Consumer Cellular, a highly rated national carrier catering to simpler wireless needs that bills monthly, even though there is no contract commitment; that's less complicated than a prepaid arrangement. Consumer Cellular uses the AT&T network. The carrier has a $15 plan with 150 voice minutes a month; you can add a second line for $10 a month. (A $30 plan offers 750 minutes per month.) If you need to text, Consumer Cellular is affordable for that, too. It charges as little as $2.50 for 100 messages per month, and bigger buckets are available.

Still more than you need? TracFone, among the better rated prepaid carriers, offers 60 minutes of airtime that must be used within 90 days for $20, or less than $7 per month. It also has monthly plans for as little as $10.

Phone: With no-contract service, you must buy the phone, but simple models are relatively affordable. For Consumer Cellular, consider the Doro PhoneEasy 410, $60, which has large buttons and other features that the carrier says make it easier for seniors to use, or for easier texting, the Motorola EX430, $80, which has a physical QWERTY keyboard. With TracFone, the LG 500G, $10, offers 5 hours of talk time on a battery charge.

Ratings on next page

Overview

Standard cell-phone service, involving a bill at the end of the month, offers smart phones at a lower price but usually requires a contract. Prepaid service, either pay-as-you-go or with a monthly allocation, is usually contract-free but offers a more limited, and generally pricier, selection of smart phones.

TOP CHOICE FOR SMART PHONES

A4 Verizon Wireless

Among the major carriers, this was the most satisfying overall and the standout for data service, an important consideration when using a smart phone. However, most new smart phones from major carriers now connect to high-speed 4G networks, and AT&T **(A7)** offered the least problematic 4G service; that makes the carrier worth considering for a 4G phone, despite a worse overall track record than **A4.**

CONSIDER IF AVAILABLE TO YOU

A2 U.S. Cellular

This carrier has a coverage map that's nationwide, but it's available only to customers in 24 mostly Midwestern states. But it is a standout in almost every respect.

SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE OPTION

A3 Credo Mobile

This carrier donates to social causes and offers satisfying enough service. It has relatively high prices but got stellar customer-support scores.

BEST CHOICES FOR BASIC NEEDS

A1 Consumer Cellular
B1 TracFone

These carriers specialize in no-frills cell phones and service. **A1** is a no-contract standard carrier aimed at seniors that offers standout customer service. **B1** is a prepaid carrier that offers very inexpensive plans for minimal phone users. Both had voice service that was above average.

BUDGET SMART-PHONE STANDOUTS

B2 Straight Talk
B6 Virgin Mobile

These no-contract carriers had solid scores. You'll generally pay more up-front for the phone with them than with a standard carrier, but they offer lower-cost unlimited, voice, text, and data plans and earned high marks for data.

SEE OUR SMART PHONES VIDEO
Use your smart phone to download the RedLaser or ShopSavvy app and scan the code for video.

Consumer Cellular · U.S. Cellular · CREDO mobile · TRACFONE wireless, inc. · Straight Talk · verizon wireless

Ratings Cell-phone service

Summary Ratings, reflecting all cities surveyed, in order of overall score. Differences in score of fewer than five points are not meaningful.

Better ◀——▶ Worse

	Provider	Reader score (0–100)	Survey results: Value	Voice	Text	Data	4G	Support: Phone	Staff knowledge	Issue resolved
A	**STANDARD**									
1	Consumer Cellular*	88	◓	◓	◓	●	–	●	●	●
2	U.S. Cellular	85	◓	●	●	●	–	●	●	●
3	Credo Mobile	76	○	○	○	◓	–	●	●	●
4	Verizon Wireless	72	◒	◓	○	◓	○	◒	◓	◓
5	Sprint	66	◒	●	◒	○	◒	◒	○	○
6	T-Mobile	64	◒	●	◒	○	○	◒	○	○
7	AT&T	62	●	●	◒	◒	◓	●	○	○
B	**PREPAID**									
1	TracFone	82	◓	◓	◓	–	–	●	◒	○
2	Straight Talk	79	◓	○	◓	◓	–	●	●	○
3	T-Mobile	76	◓	○	○	○	–	●	◒	◒
4	Verizon Wireless	75	○	◓	◓	–	–	–	○	○
5	Net10	75	○	○	–	–	–	–	–	–
6	Virgin Mobile	75	◓	○	○	◓	–	◒	○	◓
7	MetroPCS	71	○	○	●	○	–	–	–	–
8	AT&T GoPhone	68	◒	○	○	◒	–	–	◒	◒

*Offers no-contract service, but bills monthly like standard carriers.

Can't wait for that must-have phone?

Think twice about buying that new model early. Upgrading can cost you, especially if you can't wait until your two-year contract runs out. Here's what the big four cell carriers charge to upgrade to a Samsung Galaxy S III (16GB) halfway through the contract and at the end of the term. Totals below are for the cost of the phone, typically with a new two-year contract, plus upgrade fees and penalties.

Provider	Upgrade after month 12	Upgrade after month 24
AT&T	$486	$236
Sprint	$586	$236
T-Mobile	$483	$298
Verizon	$600	$230

Ratings Cell service by city

In order of reader score, within 23 metropolitan areas.
Differences in reader score of fewer than six points are not meaningful.

Better ⟷ Worse

Provider	Reader score (0–100)	Survey results: Voice	Text	Data
ATLANTA				
Verizon	74			
Sprint	68			
T-Mobile	64			
AT&T	60			
AUSTIN, TEXAS				
Verizon	71			
T-Mobile	68			
Sprint	67			
AT&T	62			
BOSTON				
Verizon	70			
T-Mobile	67			–
Sprint	67			
AT&T	59			
CHICAGO				
U.S. Cellular	85			–
Verizon	73			
T-Mobile	68			
AT&T	61			
Sprint	52			
DALLAS-FORT WORTH				
Verizon	74			
T-Mobile	67			
Sprint	67			
AT&T	64			
DENVER				
Verizon	71			
Sprint	69			
T-Mobile	66			
AT&T	58			
DETROIT				
Verizon	73			
AT&T	64			
Sprint	61			
HOUSTON				
Verizon	77			
T-Mobile	66			
Sprint	62			
AT&T	60			
KANSAS CITY				
Sprint	78			
Verizon	76			
AT&T	66			
LOS ANGELES				
Verizon	72			
T-Mobile	67			–
Sprint	65			
AT&T	57			
MIAMI				
Verizon	73			
Sprint	69			
T-Mobile	66			
AT&T	64			
MILWAUKEE				
U.S. Cellular	85			
Verizon	71			
AT&T	60			
Sprint	58			
MINNEAPOLIS-ST. PAUL				
Verizon	71			
T-Mobile	66			
Sprint	64			
AT&T	63			
NEW YORK				
Verizon	71			
Sprint	68			
T-Mobile	63		–	–
AT&T	60			
PHILADELPHIA				
Verizon	70			
T-Mobile	67			
AT&T	65			
Sprint	63			
PHOENIX				
Verizon	75			
Sprint	68			
AT&T	67			
T-Mobile	65			
SALT LAKE CITY				
Verizon	71			
T-Mobile	64			
AT&T	62			
SAN DIEGO				
Verizon	74			
T-Mobile	68			
Sprint	67			
AT&T	63			
SAN FRANCISCO				
Verizon	72			
T-Mobile	66		–	–
Sprint	66			
AT&T	57			
SEATTLE				
Verizon	71			
Sprint	68			
T-Mobile	66			
AT&T	62			
ST. LOUIS				
Verizon	73			
Sprint	72			
AT&T	65			
TAMPA, FLA.				
Verizon	73			
AT&T	69			
T-Mobile	68			
Sprint	68			
WASHINGTON, D.C.				
Verizon	70			
Sprint	66			
AT&T	65			
T-Mobile	64		–	–

More Ratings on next page

Guide to the Ratings

Based on responses from ConsumerReports.org subscribers with cell-phone service surveyed in September 2012. Only providers for which we had sufficient data of the specified type are included in the table. The **Ratings by city** show providers with sufficient data there, including standard and prepaid customers; not all carriers available in a city may be rated. In both charts, "—" indicates insufficient data. **Reader score** reflects respondents' overall satisfaction with cell-phone service and is not limited to the factors listed. A score of 100 would mean all respondents were completely satisfied; 80 very satisfied, on average; 60, fairly well satisfied. The following ratings are based on the occurrence of problems in the previous week and are adjusted for frequency of use: **voice** (no service, static); **text** (difficulty sending/receiving messages, delays); and **4G** (service unavailable, interrupted, or downgraded to slower service). Along with **issue resolved** (the percentage who said their issue was satisfactorily resolved in a timely manner), the preceding ratings are relative, reflecting differences from the average of all providers in all areas. The following reflect mean scores on a scale of "Very poor" to "Excellent": **value** for money, satisfaction with **data** service, ease and speed of reaching support staff through the **phone** system, and support **staff knowledge.** Findings might not reflect the general U.S. population.

Where are the Windows 8 phones?

These phones came out too late to make our Ratings chart. See our first impressions in the box on page 31.

Overview

The recommended phones below stand out for the reasons cited. For phones that come in 16GB and 32GB capacities, the price is for the storage size we tested. Prices are for a two-year contract, including rebates. (Carriers are listed in order of reader satisfaction.) A3, B1, B3, C1, C3, and D2 let you minimize a video on the screen to perform other tasks, and wirelessly share content with other devices. You can tilt all of those models and D1 on their side while viewing e-mail to see split-screen views.

BIG SCREEN, BIG PERFORMANCE

A3 **Samsung** Galaxy S III (Verizon, 32GB) $250
B1 **Samsung** Galaxy S III (Sprint, 16GB) $200
B4 **HTC** Evo 4G LTE (Sprint) $200
C1 **Samsung** Galaxy S III (T-Mobile, 16GB) $280
D1 **LG** Optimus G (AT&T) $200
D2 **Samsung** Galaxy S III (AT&T, 16GB) $200

These phones combine a superb, sizable screen (4.7 inches for **B4** and **D1,** 4.8 inches for the others) with top-notch performance and innovative features. All allow you to launch the camera or messaging from a locked screen, which is handy. They also have cameras with advanced features, such as the ability to snap a still while shooting a video, and they take very good photos (except **B4,** whose photos are only fair). **D1** has a pull-down menu option app that lets you scribble notes with your finger on anything on the phone's screen, including photos, e-mails, calendar appointments, and the home screen itself. The finished "memo" becomes a picture you can e-mail or text to others, and share on social networks. All except **B4** have front-facing cameras that monitor your eyes when you read so the screen doesn't time out.

COMPACT HIGH PERFORMERS

A4 **Motorola** Droid Razr M (Verizon) $100
A5 **Apple** iPhone 5 (Verizon, 16GB) $200
B2 **Apple** iPhone 5 (Sprint, 16GB) $200
C2 **HTC** One S (T-Mobile) $150
D3 **Apple** iPhone 5 (AT&T, 16GB) $200

Consider these if you want top performance in a smaller package. **A4** and **C2** have a high-resolution, 4.3-inch screen; **A5, B2,** and **D3** have a 4-inch display. The free new Apple Maps app, for iPhone 5 and other iPhones using iOS 6, gives clear guidance in a streamlined interface but offers fewer details and options than the free Google navigation on Android phones. The iPhone 5 was the first smart-phone camera we've tested that

A1 Motorola

A4 Motorola

A9 Samsung

Ratings Smart phones

Recommended models only From 74 tested. In performance order, by carrier.

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score (0 P | F | G | VG | E 100)	Ease of use	Messaging	Web browsing	Display quality	Voice quality	Phoning	Battery life	Camera: image quality	Camera: video quality	Portability	Operating system*	Display size (in.)	Camera (megapixels)	Broadband 4G data	World phone	Memory-card slot
		Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model. We also list models of some phones offered by other carriers.																		
	A	**VERIZON** The most satisfying major carrier in our survey.																		
✔	1	**Motorola** Droid Razr Maxx HD	$300	79	●	●	●	●	○	◓	●	◓	○	◓	A	4.7	8.0	•	•	•
✔	2	**Motorola** Droid Razr HD	200	77	●	●	●	●	○	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	A	4.7	8.0	•	•	•
✔	3	**Samsung** Galaxy S III (32GB) 16GB, $200; also available on U.S. Cellular, 16GB, $200; 32GB, $250	250	76	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	◓	○	◓	A	4.8	8.0	•		•
✔	4	**Motorola** Droid Razr M	100	75	●	●	●	●	○	◓	○	◓	○	●	A	4.3	8.0	•	•	•
✔	5	**Apple** iPhone 5 (16GB) 32 GB, $300; 64 GB, $400	200	75	●	◓	●	●	○	◓	○	●	◓	●	i	4.0	8.0	•	•	
✔	6	**LG** Spectrum 2	100	74	●	●	●	●	◒	●	○	◓	◒	◓	A	4.7	8.0	•	•	•
✔	7	**Motorola** Droid 4	100	73	●	●	●	◓	○	◓	○	◓	○	○	A	4.0	8.0	•	•	•
✔	8	**Samsung** Galaxy Nexus	50	72	●	◓	●	●	◒	◓	○	○	○	◓	A	4.7	5.0	•		
✔	9	**Samsung** Stratosphere	50	72	●	●	●	●	◒	●	○	○	◒	○	A	4.0	4.9	•		•
✔	10	**HTC** Droid Incredible 4G LTE	100	71	●	●	●	●	◒	○	○	○	○	◓	A	4.0	8.0	•		•
✔	11	**Samsung** Galaxy Stellar	0	71	●	●	●	●	◒	●	○	◒	◒	◓	A	4.0	3.1	•		•
✔	12	**LG** Lucid	20	70	●	●	●	◓	◒	◓	○	○	◒	◓	A	4.0	4.9	•		•
✔	13	**LG** Intuition	150	68	●	●	●	●	○	◒	○	○	○	◒	A	5.0	8.0	•		
✔	14	**Apple** iPhone 4S (16GB) 64GB, $300	100	67	●	◓	○	●	○	◓	○	◓	◓	●	i	3.5	8.0		•	
	B	**SPRINT** Less satisfying than the top carriers, but among the more satisfying in some cities.																		
✔	1	**Samsung** Galaxy S III (16GB) 32GB, $250; also available on Credo Mobile, 16GB, $200, 32GB, $250; also available with no contract on MetroPCS, $500	200	76	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	◓	○	◓	A	4.8	8.0	•		•
✔	2	**Apple** iPhone 5 (16GB) 32GB, $300; 64GB, $400	200	75	●	◓	●	●	○	◓	○	●	◓	●	i	4.0	8.0	•	•	
✔	3	**Samsung** Galaxy Note II (16GB) Also available on Verizon and U.S. Cellular, $300	300	75	●	●	●	○	○	○	◓	●	◓	◒	A	5.5	8.0	•	•	•
✔	4	**HTC** Evo 4G LTE	200	73	●	●	●	●	○	◓	○	◒	○	◓	A	4.7	8.0	•		•
✔	5	**Motorola** Photon Q 4G LTE	200	73	●	●	●	●	○	◓	○	◓	○	○	A	4.3	8.0	•	•	•
✔	6	**Samsung** Galaxy Victory 4G LTE	100	71	●	◓	●	◓	○	◓	○	○	○	◓	A	4.0	4.9	•		•
✔	7	**LG** Viper	50	69	●	●	●	◓	◒	◓	○	○	◒	◓	A	4.0	4.9	•		•
✔	8	**Apple** iPhone 4S (16GB) 64GB, $300; also available with no contract on Virgin Mobile, $650	100	67	●	◓	○	●	○	◓	○	◓	◓	●	i	3.5	8.0		•	

B4 HTC

C3 Samsung

D1 LG

Excellent
Very good
Good
Fair
Poor

☑ Recommended

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score (0 P | F | G | VG | E 100)	Test results: Ease of use	Messaging	Web browsing	Display quality	Voice quality	Phoning	Battery life	Camera: image quality	Camera: video quality	Portability	Features: Operating system*	Display size (in.)	Camera (megapixels)	Broadband 4G data	World phone	Memory-card slot
		Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model. We also list models of some phones offered by other carriers.																		
C	**T-MOBILE** Less satisfying than the top carriers, but among the more satisfying in a few cities.																			
☑	1	**Samsung** Galaxy S III (16GB) 32GB, $330	$280	78	●	●	●	●	○	●	◒	◒	○	◒	A	4.8	8.0	•	•	•
☑	2	**HTC** One S	150	77	●	●	●	●	○	◒	◒	○	○	●	A	4.3	8.0	•	•	
☑	3	**Samsung** Galaxy Note II (16GB) Also available on AT&T, $300	370	76	●	●	●	●	○	○	●	●	◒	◒	A	5.5	8.0	•	•	•
☑	4	**LG** Optimus L9	80	76	●	●	●	●	○	◒	◒	○	◒	●	A	4.5	5.0	•	•	•
☑	5	**Samsung** Galaxy S Blaze 4G	100	74	●	●	●	●	○	◒	○	○	◒	◒	A	4.0	4.9	•	•	•
☑	6	**Samsung** Galaxy S Relay 4G	150	73	●	●	●	◒	○	◒	●	○	○	◒	A	4.0	4.9	•	•	•
☑	7	**T-Mobile** myTouch 4G	0	69	●	◒	◒	●	○	◒	○	◒	○	◒	A	3.8	5.1	•	•	•
D	**AT&T** Among the less satisfying in almost all of the cities in our survey, but a standout for 4G service.																			
☑	1	**LG** Optimus G	200	79	●	●	●	●	○	◒	●	◒	◒	◒	A	4.7	8.0	•	•	•
☑	2	**Samsung** Galaxy S III (16GB)	200	78	●	●	●	●	○	●	◒	◒	○	◒	A	4.8	8.0	•	•	•
☑	3	**Apple** iPhone 5 (16GB) 32GB, $300; 64GB, $400	200	77	●	◒	●	●	○	◒	○	●	◒	●	i	4.0	8.0	•	•	
☑	4	**HTC** One X	100	76	●	●	●	●	○	◒	○	○	◒	◒	A	4.7	8.0	•	•	
☑	5	**Samsung** Galaxy S II Skyrocket	100	76	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	◒	○	◒	A	4.5	8.0	•	•	•
☑	6	**LG** Escape	50	76	●	●	●	●	○	◒	◒	○	○	◒	A	4.3	4.9	•	•	•
☑	7	**Motorola** Atrix HD	100	75	●	●	●	●	○	◒	◒	◒	◒	◒	A	4.5	8.0	•	•	•
☑	8	**LG** Nitro HD	50	75	●	●	●	●	◒	◒	○	○	◒	◒	A	4.5	8.0	•	•	•
☑	9	**HTC** Vivid	50	75	●	●	●	◒	○	◒	○	○	○	○	A	4.5	8.0	•	•	•
☑	10	**Apple** iPhone 4S (16GB)	100	74	●	◒	◒	●	○	◒	○	◒	◒	●	I	3.5	8.0	•	•	
☑	11	**Samsung** Galaxy Exhilarate	0	73	●	●	●	●	○	◒	○	○	◒	◒	A	4.0	4.9	•	•	•
☑	12	**Pantech** Flex	20	72	●	◒	●	●	○	◒	◒	○	◒	◒	A	4.3	8.0	•	•	•
☑	13	**Nokia** Lumia 900	0	71	◒	●	●	●	○	◒	○	◒	○	○	W	4.3	8.0	•	•	
☑	14	**HTC** Titan II	200	71	◒	●	●	◒	○	◒	○	○	○	○	W	4.7	16.1	•	•	
☑	15	**Sony** Xperia Ion	100	71	◒	◒	●	●	○	◒	○	◒	○	◒	A	4.6	12.0	•	•	•
☑	16	**Samsung** Focus 2	50	70	◒	◒	●	◒	○	◒	○	◒	◒	●	W	4.0	5.0	•	•	
☑	17	**Samsung** Rugby Smart	50	70	◒	●	◒	●	○	◒	○	○	◒	◒	A	3.7	4.9	•	•	•

*A=Android, i=iOS, and W=Windows Phone.

yields excellent still photos and very good video, and its Siri voice assistant now works with apps, too. But unlike other 4G Verizon and Sprint smart phones, **A5** and **B2** can't simultaneously support a phone call and an Internet-based connection over the cellular network. That makes **D3** arguably the best iPhone 5 for multitaskers. **A4** squeezed a fairly large, 4.3-inch display into a relatively small case, yet it delivers performance and convenient features close to that of its siblings, **A1** and **A2.** The thin, lightweight **C2** has an especially intuitive interface. Cameras on all these phones let you snap a still while shooting a video.

BEST FOR LONG BATTERY LIFE

A1 **Motorola** Droid Razr Maxx HD (Verizon) $300

This marathon performer delivered 13 hours of talk time on a single charge in our tests. It has a 4.7-inch screen and is almost identical to the less expensive and thinner **A2,** which has a shorter battery life.

FOR A TABLET ALTERNATIVE

B3 **Samsung** Galaxy Note II (Sprint, 16GB) $300

C3 **Samsung** Galaxy Note II (T-Mobile, 16GB) $370

With its 5.5-inch screen, this second-generation Note will be too big for some pockets and hands. But the phone's large display offers top-notch performance even in bright light. And you can shrink the dial pad and keyboard in portrait mode and slide them to the side of the screen for easier one-handed operation. It comes with a stylus that allows you to jot down and share notes or sketches on the memo app and crop photos by simply tracing over them. You can preview e-mails, videos, photo albums, Web pages, and other content just by hovering over them.

BEST CHOICES WITH A KEYBOARD

A7 **Motorola** Droid 4 (Verizon) $100

A9 **Samsung** Stratosphere (Verizon) $50

B5 **Motorola** Photon Q 4G LTE (Sprint) $200

C6 **Samsung** Galaxy S Relay 4G (T-Mobile) $150

These are fine choices for serious typists frustrated by virtual touch-screen keyboards. Their slide-out keyboards are among the best we've seen. They're clearly labeled and logically laid out and have five rows, with dedicated buttons for numbers across the top row. Their keyboards have directional buttons for more precise Web scrolling and cursor placement. **A7** and **A9** show predictive text while using the slide-out keyboard. **A9** also has a button for inserting emoticons into text and instant messages. **C6's** keyboard has convenient e-mail and messaging buttons to launch those apps.

Smart phones

Multipurpose phones continue to become more capable through more responsive touch screens, 4G connectivity, thinner profiles, and other advances. The recommended models detailed below are listed with their price as of October 2012, with a two-year contract including rebates.

BEST FOR LONG BATTERY LIFE

Motorola Droid Razr Maxx HD (Verizon) $300

The Droid Razr Maxx HD, which has a 4.7-inch, high-definition display, is a marathon performer (with more than 13 hours of talk time on a single charge) thanks to its large-capacity battery. In addition to the larger, higher-definition display, the Droid Razr Maxx HD adds near field communication (NFC) to support e-wallet services and enable wireless data exchanges between similarly equipped phones. Apart from the battery, the Maxx HD is all but identical to the Droid Razr HD. The Razr's Smart Actions feature lets you maximize its already outstanding battery life by enabling you to program the phone to change its settings according to your GPS location or battery level. For example, you can set it to turn on Wi-Fi and shut off Bluetooth when you arrive at home or work. (Key A1)

BEST CHOICES WITH A KEYBOARD

Motorola Droid 4 (Verizon) $100

The Motorola Droid 4 has 4G LTE capability, a higher-resolution front-facing camera, and other improvements. It has a top-notch slide-out physical keyboard that features five rows (a rarity among phones) with dedicated buttons for numbers across the top row, as well as a convenient directional and select key. But unlike the Droid 3, it's not a world phone. The phone has a 4-inch, high-resolution, touch-screen display with a finger-driven interface. Its intuitive navigation provides easy access to all of its main functions via a highly responsive touch screen that supports up to five home screens of apps and programmable shortcuts, as well as its menu, home, back, and search keys. The phone's directional buttons make it easier to precisely position the cursor, a plus when editing text and clicking on hyperlinks. (Key A7)

BIG SCREEN, BIG PERFORMANCE

HTC Evo 4G LTE (Sprint) $200

The thin Evo 4G LTE has a 4.7-inch, high-definition (720p) display and is one of the first phones to support Sprint's 4G LTE network. The phone's camera can shoot a series of photos in rapid-fire succession while in camera mode; it can also snap a still picture at any moment while shooting a video. The Evo 4G LTE also comes with a technology called HD Voice, which Sprint says will produce "fuller, more natural-sounding and less fatiguing voice quality" and a reduction in "troublesome background noises," especially outdoors. But HD Voice works only when both phones on the call have the feature and are within Sprint's HD Voice network, which hasn't yet been deployed. It has a kickstand to prop up the phone so that you can view videos hands-free. (Key B4)

BEST CHOICES WITH A KEYBOARD

Samsung Stratosphere (Verizon) $50

The Samsung Stratosphere is a very good smart phone with a large, brilliant display, a top-notch keyboard, and 4G capability. And it's relatively inexpensive. It has a display with excellent quality. The keypad is easy to see in bright light. Count on excellent e-mail readability and attachment capabilities, including document editing. (Key A9)

BEST CHOICES WITH A KEYBOARD

Motorola Photon Q 4G LTE (Sprint) $200

The Motorola Photon Q 4G LTE is a very good smart phone that offers a bevy of features and capabilities to go along with its top-notch slide-out keyboard. For starters, it's one of the few Sprint phones that you can take abroad. Its 4.3-inch high-resolution display delivered excellent performance, and it was easy to read in bright light. And its Smart Actions feature automatically changes phone settings to maximize battery life or to suit other personal preferences. The camera, which produced very good pictures, can snap a still image while recording a video. The phone also supports wireless (NFC) technology that allows you to pay at store registers with your phone. (Key B5)

COMPACT HIGH PERFORMER

HTC One S (T-Mobile) $150

The thin and lightweight One S is among several HTC phones with cameras that can shoot a series of photos in rapid-fire succession while in camera mode; they can also snap a still picture at any moment while shooting a video. The phone itself has a 4.3-inch, high-resolution, touch-screen display that's easy to see in bright light. The phone's finger-driven interface allows you to launch a favorite app such as a camera, e-mail, or a Web browser directly from a locked screen without the need to unlock it. You do that by dragging any one of four always visible app icons into a little circle at the bottom of the locked screen. The default apps are phone, mail, messages, and camera, but you can use others on your phone instead. (Key C2)

BIG SCREEN, BIG PERFORMANCE

Samsung Galaxy S III (Verizon, 32GB) $250

(Sprint, 16GB, $200; T-Mobile, 16GB,$280; AT&T, 16GB, $200)

The Samsung Galaxy S III offers top-notch performance and some of the most innovative features the Android platform has to offer, standing out for its huge, 4.8-inch, high-definition (720p) display, which performed well in bright light. The front-facing camera monitors your eyes while you're reading a Web page or other document to prevent the screen from timing out. You can wirelessly beam Web links, contact info, and even photos and videos to other Galaxy S III phones. Pop Up Play lets you minimize a video playing on the screen so that you can perform other tasks, such as browsing the Web and sending e-mail messages. (Key A3, B1, C1, D2)

BIG SCREEN, BIG PERFORMANCE

LG Optimus G (AT&T) $200

This high-scoring phone, which has a brilliant 4.7-inch display, a highly responsive touch screen, and a long-lasting battery, offers an impressive blend of top-notch hardware and intriguing apps for work and play. Those include Quick Memo, a pull-down menu option that lets you use your finger to scribble notes on anything you see on the phone's screen, including photos, e-mails, calendar appointments, and the home screen itself. The finished "memo" actually becomes a picture that you can easily e-mail or text to others, as well as share on social networks. Also onboard is Video Wiz, an app that can quickly turn a tossed salad of video clips, photos, and sound clips into a polished multimedia presentation. (Key D1)

COMPACT HIGH PERFORMER

Motorola Droid Razr M (Verizon) $100

The Droid Razr M is not as thin as the Razr, nor does it have the Razr Maxx's marathon battery life. Yet this noticeably smaller phone manages to be just as powerful and even offers an equally large, 4.3-inch display that's actually better. It supports up to seven home screens. A widget made up of a three-circle cluster presents a wealth of useful data, including the date, call and text notifications, weather, and data/battery usage. The phone comes loaded with Google Chrome, which may enhance Web browsing with its features and capabilities. The Smart Actions app lets you program the phone to change its settings according to your GPS location or battery level. For example, you can set it to turn on Wi-Fi and shut off Bluetooth when you arrive at home or work. Or you can have the phone turn screen brightness down when the battery level gets below a certain point. (Key A4)

FOR A TABLET ALTERNATIVE

Samsung Galaxy Note II (Sprint, 16GB) $300 (T-Mobile, 16GB, $370)

Samsung's new Galaxy Note II has an even bigger and better touch-screen display than the original Note, providing outstanding readability in most lighting. The bountiful 5.5-inch display makes the phone a compelling choice for e-book fans and heavy Web users. It's one of only two phones in our Ratings that took excellent photos. Its stylus allows you to jot down notes more easily, as well as clip, crop, and share photos, maps, and other content with just a few strokes. You can also preview e-mails, videos, photo albums, Web pages, and other content just by hovering the stylus over them on the page. One-handed operations are easier, thanks to a setting that shrinks the keyboard and keypad and lets you slide them closer to your thumb. Also available from AT&T, Verizon, and U.S. Cellular for $300. (Key B3, C3)

COMPACT HIGH PERFORMER

Apple iPhone 5 (Verizon, Sprint, AT&T, 16GB) $200

The iPhone 5 is a major step up from earlier models, offering a larger, 4-inch, high-resolution display; a slimmer, lighter case; support for faster 4G LTE data networks; a faster processor; and the best camera we've ever seen on a phone. Its 8-megapixel camera, which has a very short shutter lag, is one of only two phones in our Ratings that took excellent pictures. The 4-inch display's 16:9 aspect ratio makes it better for viewing wide-screen video and game content and provides room for an additional row of app icons. In addition, the display is easy to see in bright light. New features that come via its updated operating system include expanded app control and more meaningful searches for Siri, its built-in voice-controlled personal digital assistant, as well as GPS navigation with spoken turn-by-turn directions and automatic rerouting. (Key A5, B2, D3)

Overview - Carriers

Standard cell-phone service, involving a bill at the end of the month, offers smart phones at a lower price but usually requires a contract. Prepaid service, either pay-as-you-go or with a monthly allocation, is usually contract-free but offers a more limited, and generally pricier, selection of phones.

TOP CHOICE FOR SMART PHONES

Verizon Wireless

Among the major carriers, this was the most satisfying overall and the standout for data service, a key consideration when using a smart phone. However, most new smart phones from major carriers now connect to faster 4G networks, and AT&T offered the least problematic 4G service; that makes the carrier worth considering for a 4G phone, despite a worse overall track record than Verizon . (Key A4)

CONSIDER IF AVAILABLE TO YOU

U.S. Cellular

This carrier has a coverage map that's nationwide, but it's available only to customers in 24 mostly Midwestern states. But it is a standout in almost every respect. (Key A2)

SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE OPTION

Credo

This carrier donates to social causes and offers satisfying enough service. It has relatively high prices but got stellar customer-support scores. (Key A3)

BEST CHOICES FOR BASIC NEEDS

Consumer Cellular

This carrier specializes in no-frills cell phones and service. It's a no-contract standard carrier aimed at seniors that offers standout customer service. (Key A1)

TracFone

This prepaid carrier that offers very inexpensive plans for minimal phone users. Both had voice service that was above average. (Key B1)

BUDGET SMART -PHONE STANDOUTS

Straight Talk

This prepaid carrier was more satisfying overall than contract service from any major carriers. It received data scores on a par with Verizon. You'll generally pay more up-front for the phone than with a standard carrier, but it offers lower-cost unlimited, voice, text and data plans. (Key B2)

Virgin Mobile

This prepaid carrier received high marks for value and data satisfaction. You'll generally pay more up-front for the phone than with a standard carrier, but it offers lower-cost unlimited, voice, text and data plans. (Key B6)

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